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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000473

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM KDEM GG

SUBJECT: USUPASHVILI: UNITED OPPOSITION BROKEN, NO EASY END
TO HUNGER STRIKE

REF: TBILISI 444

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Mark X. Perry for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On March 19, Republican Party Chairman David Usupashvili told Charge that the leadership of the United National Council of Opposition (UNC) and the New Rightists (NR) parties, weakened by their ongoing hunger strike (reftel), is nearly broken. According to Usupashvili, both the UNC and NR, and the ruling United National Movement (UNM), are looking for a way out of the current situation. He said that negotiations have been taking place. However, Usupashvili says that neither side wants to yield first. The opposition Christian Democrats (CDM) and Republicans each proposed separate compromises to break the impasse on March ¶18. Usupashvili briefed Charge on both plans and the problems with the CDM initiative. Usupashvili said Parliamentary Speaker Nino Burjanadze agreed his proposal had merit. Although Burjanadze said she would present it to the UNM's election team, Usupashvili was not optimistic that the government will agree to his proposal. Regardless of which electoral system exists on election day, Usupashvili said that his party will participate. End summary.

Hunger Strike Takes Toll on UNC, NR

¶12. (C) On March 19, Usupashvili told Charge that the UNC and NR leaders, including former presidential candidates MP Levan Gachechiladze and MP David Gamkrelidze, are extremely weakened by their ongoing hunger strike. Usupashvili said he met with them earlier March 19, and both leaders are nearly incapable of physically or mentally making decisions. Usupashvili said that both the UNC and NR, and the ruling United National Movement (UNM), are looking for a way out of the current crisis, now entering its tenth day. However, neither side wants to appear to have given in.

¶13. (C) Comment: This concurs with a brief exchange Poloff had with UNM insider MP Giga Bokeria on March 18. Bokeria said the UNM had no solution to the crisis which would allow the UNC to end the hunger strike in any dignified way. End comment.

Christian Democrats Leak Proposal?

¶14. (C) Usupashvili said that the UNC and NR were secretly negotiating with Burjanadze via Industrialist MP Zurab Tkemeladze. Usupashvili said a handwritten proposal was drafted that would add 35 party list seats, allow opposition parties to hold secretary positions on the district election commissions, resolve the demand for a new Central Election

Commission Chair, and settle 31 May as the election date.

¶ 15. (C) According to Usupashvili, on March 18 the CDM (led by former MP and Imedi TV anchor, Giorgi Targamadze) leaked this proposal to increase the number of party-list MPs. The CDM, which was not party to the talks, subsequently announced the proposal as their party's solution to the crisis. Saakashvili responded to this proposal with a statement from New York that the government is willing to look at it, provided all the opposition parties are in agreement.

Republicans Propose Alternative

¶ 16. (C) Usupashvili said the Republicans had to respond, because the proposal to increase the number of total seats in Parliament beyond 150 is a direct violation of the 2004 referendum. Usupashvili said no time remains to again amend the constitution, which requires a one-month waiting period prior to being discussed in Parliament. Finally, Usupashvili said the current 75 party-list, 75 single-mandate distribution also conflicts with the constitution, because the constitutionally-required seats for South Ossetia and Abkhazia are not accounted for in the system.

¶ 17. (C) Consequently, Usupashvili proposed a separate compromise to Burjanadze on March 18. Usupashvili's suggestion is to keep the 75 party-list seats, and then have the 75 majoritarian seats elected in multi-mandate districts - rather than single-mandates. Such a system would not require amending the constitution and the multi-mandate districts could include the separatist areas.

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¶ 18. (C) Usupashvili said that Burjanadze agreed his plan seemed plausible and held merit. She said she would present the proposal to the UNM's election team (which Usupashvili said includes Minister of Internal Affairs Vano Merabishvili and former Prosecutor General, and current Head of Presidential Administration, Zurab Adeishvili) but she expressed doubt that the UNM leadership would go for it. Usupashvili was also not optimistic that the government will agree to his proposal. He said the UNC is so worn down that it is unlikely they will support it either, even though it would better serve the opposition's chances in the election.

¶ 19. (C) Usupashvili said if nothing changes and the election is held under the current system, his party would participate in the election. In this case, he would try to make one substantial change to the single-mandate seats: increase the first-round threshold to 40 percent. (Note: Currently, the seat goes to the candidate with the highest percentage of votes after they surpass 30 percent. If no candidate surpasses 30 percent in the first round, then the top two hold a run-off within two weeks. End note.) Usupashvili said a candidate could win the seat in the first round without 65 percent of the district's support, under the current threshold. Usupashvili said Burjanadze thought she could get approval for 35 percent, but not 40. Usupashvili said that if the UNC agrees to the CDM proposal, or the current systems remains, the Republicans plan to participate in the upcoming election.

Comment

¶ 10. (C) Charge told Usupashvili that the Embassy will continue to advise the government that they are responsible for strengthening democracy in Georgia and that President Saakashvili is hearing the same message in Washington. Still, it is important for the opposition to try to find a way out of this situation, where disputes can be resolved in Parliament rather than on the street. Charge thanked

Usupashvili for his offer to assist on Georgia's consideration for MAP in NATO, and told him that he would ask Washington if a joint statement by opposition parties supportive of MAP would be helpful now.

PERRY